Communion meditation ~~February~~ March 7, 1965
Luke 9:~~22~~18--27

In many ways, we in the contemporary church, are like the disciples of Jesus when they happened upon him while he was praying, and then found themselves asked a very embarrassing question. It is easy to romanticize these twelve men: and endue them with powers and status far above ourselves. We think of them as very religious men: as intelligent, courageous and strong men. In fact, they were special men, for Jesus had chosen them to be his disciples. But still they were quite ordinary. Just how ordinary they were, and how much like us they were, is indicated in the remarkable passage I have read from Luke's Gospel.

It's extremely difficult to know when this significant interchange took place within the time span of Jesus' ministry. But we are safe in assuming that it occurred somewhere in the middle, after the disciples had been with him for several months. How strange it is, then, for him to be asking them; "Who do you say that I am". It is possible that they had been following him around for almost a year without a clear idea of who he was?

I said intially that we are very much like the disciples in this instance. We are committed in one way or another to the church of Jesus Christ. In every group of Christians there are some who are deeply loyal to the church and its work. Others are a bit milder, faithful but not overly so. And there are those who remain on the periphery, attending occassionally, participating sporadically. But one thing that is common to us all and to the disciples twenty centuries ago, is the lack of a definitive conviction about this question: "Who do you say that I am.?"

Jesus intiated the discussion by asking: "Who do men say that I am?" For months he had been traveling throughout Palestine, teaching, preaching and healing: he wanted to know what the people were saying about him. The answer he got is interesting; Soem were saying John the Baptist, a very popular preacher who so threatened Herod that it cost him his head. Others said Elijah., the hero-prohpet who was to return

to prepare the way for the Messiah. Still others thought he was one of the Old Testament rophets returned from the dead. All of these answers demonstrate that Jesus impact had been considerable: people knew about him and talked about him. All are highly complementary: he was held in high esteem. But them, without comment, as if it didn't matter what the people thought, he turned the question to his diciples, his 12 friends who were completely identified with him.

The world still thinks highly of Jesus. ~~the church had an impact on life in many areas.~~ A common sampling of opinion would probably reveal that the average American regards Jesus as the best man who ever lived. Some would say that he was the world's greatest teacher. The historically minded would identify him with the instiution that bears his name, and rank him with Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Charlemagne, as one of Histories movers of men and events.

But now, as then, what the world thinks is not the important question. Rather it is what his friends, his followers are thinking that concerned is important.

The disciples followed Jesus for months without answering the question. When they could avoid it no longer, when he asked them, Peter answer on theirb behalf. But even then they quickly demonstarted that they really didn't comprehend: or they really didn't beleive the confession Peter had made for them.

Likewise, today - it is possibel to be a follower, a member of the church, and avaoid answering the question, "Who do you say that I am?" In fact, I think at times that the church is its own worst enemy inn this respect. We are so very busy building buildings and attending meetings and studying the mission of the church: that we don't have time for the question: and if it is asked we are too occurppied to answer.

But suddenly, thinking about this passage, we see that the question and our answer to it - is really the heart of the whole matter. During the Lenten season i t becomes increasingly difficult to ~~ignore~~ avoid coming to some conclusion regarding the identity of this man.

It is the question of God, - the question of what really has meaning for me: what is there in the nature of things to which I can give my total loyalty. From the mouth of Jesus it is the question: "Who do you say that I am?"

There are only a few really ultimate questions a man must answer in his life-time. Among them might be: a vocational decision, or the choice of husband of wife. But most of the decisions we make are secondary: what kind of car to buy, where to go on vacation: what clubs to join. Nothing very great or significant hinges on the decisions we make 99% of the time.

There is one question that is ultimate, however, a question that every man must answer and which every man does answer one way or another.* As the drama of the Passion unfolds in the Lenten season it is impossible not to hear the question. For twenty centuries the church has been stating its case: even today as we celebrate his Last Supper we are asking and answering the question: "~~Who do you say that I am?~~"

Jesus allowed his disciples a period of grace. In the same manner the work of the church continues without constantly demanding an answer to this question. But there comes a time when we, like Patere, find ourselves face to face with the claims of the historic testaimony of the church, the man himself, and his demand that we decide: "Who do you say that I am?"

In view of what we claim about him, it is an ultimate question. For we are saying that to compare him with great men of the past, the John's and Elijah's, is not enough. We are claiming that he was the Christ of God: a man who contained in himself the person of God: a man who, ultimately, above all else, revealed to men the nature of Almighty God. We are not celebrating the death of a misunderstood martyr like Joan of Arc, or a persecuted teacher like Socrates. We are celebrating the fact that God Almighty took on human flesh and died the death of humanity. We look on that event, not as one of the tragedies of history, but as the focal point of history, the central event in the story of God and man. And then we are celebrating our conviction that death did not contain him: that the crucifixion did not settle the matter as it should have. We have the supreme audacity to claim that he rose from his grave, and that in his complete participation in humanity he has become

the bridge between God and ourselves.

("Who do you say that I am?") When that question was first asked these claims had not yet been made. Today we make them: and today every man answers the question in light of them. We don't have as many options as the disciples. We can no longer call him prophet or teacher. To us the question becomes ultimate.

As we proceed through the Lenten season you will be hearing ~~xxxxxx~~ what the church teaches about him: we will discuss atonement, forgiveness, salvation. But Jesus did not ask for a theological disertation: he simply ~~asked "Who do you say that I am?"~~ turned to those who had followed him, those who knew him: those who had claimed him as their master and asked - "Who do you say that I am?"